Purpose and Peril: Challenges for Higher Ed Leadership

Address to Students and Faculty in the Higher Education Program
University of Pennsylvania, Graduate School of Education
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President Patricia McGuire
Trinity Washington University

In preparation for this talk today, I had a long conversation with a source that I thought might provide some good insights on our topic – "Purpose and Peril: Challenges for Higher Education Leadership."

The source[1] confirmed what we already know about the challenges facing higher education today:
- *Rising costs*
- *Declining enrollments*
- *Lingering effects of the pandemic*
- *Changes in the job markets and employer demands*
- *Political Climate[2]*

We speculated about the future of higher education, and my source theorized that "…*technological advancements, changing demographics, and evolving workforce needs along with globalization and greater personalized learning…"[3]* would all have impacts on the future shape of higher ed.

My source also held forth on the ongoing relevance of Cardinal Newman's 19th Century Idea of A University despite the fact that Newman wrote in a very different time and place:

> *"Newman argued that the purpose of a university was not merely to provide students with a vocational education, but also to cultivate the intellect, foster critical thinking skills, and develop the character of the student. …Furthermore, Newman's emphasis on the*

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[1] As revealed in the text, the source is ChatGPT --- *all quotations from ChatGPT are in italics*. The use of ChatGPT quotations is simply to provide introductory illustrations for this discussion that includes identification of Artificial Intelligence as one of the great new challenges for higher education.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid.

value of a liberal education that includes exposure to a broad range of subjects is still relevant today. While many students may be tempted to focus solely on the practical and job-oriented aspects of their education, Newman's vision of a university as a place where students are exposed to a wide range of ideas and perspectives remains an important goal for higher education."[4]

I then asked the source what it takes for a college president to be successful in this environment. Again, my source did not hold back. The advice is familiar: *"...a successful college president must be a visionary leader who can inspire and motivate others, think strategically, communicate effectively, raise funds, collaborate with others, and adapt to changing circumstances."*[5]

Finally, I asked my source how artificial intelligence is likely to affect higher education. The source replied:

> *"Artificial intelligence has the potential to significantly change higher education in a variety of ways. ...*
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> 1. *Personalized learning: AI can help personalize learning for individual students based on their unique learning style, pace, and needs.*
> 2. *Adaptive assessment: AI can also improve assessments by adapting to each student's skill level and providing customized feedback.*
> 3. *Enhanced research capabilities: AI can assist researchers by analyzing large datasets, identifying patterns, and generating hypotheses.*
> 4. *Increased efficiency: AI can automate administrative tasks such as grading, scheduling, and record-keeping, freeing up time for educators to focus on teaching and research.*
> 5. *New learning modalities: AI can enable new forms of learning, such as virtual reality simulations and personalized chatbots that can answer student questions in real-time."*[6]

The source went on to say that,

> *"Overall, AI has the potential to improve the quality and accessibility of higher education. However, it's important to recognize that AI is not a panacea and that there are risks and challenges associated with its use. Educators and policymakers must carefully consider the ethical and social implications of AI in higher education and work to ensure that it is used in a responsible and equitable manner."*[7]

I found this final comment to be quite interesting given the fact that --- as you may have guessed by now --- my dialogue partner and source for this conversation was none other than ChatGPT. I was somewhat relieved to know that the artificial brain sees a need for us humans to pay

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[4] Ibid

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

attention to the ethical and social implications of this marvelous, potentially monstrous, invention.

I should note that ChatGPT also hastened to note that it will not put the faculty out of business.

> *"AI can assist with certain tasks, such as grading multiple-choice tests or providing personalized feedback to students based on their performance. However, teaching also involves more complex skills, such as critical thinking, creativity, empathy, and communication, which are difficult for AI to replicate.*
>
> *"Furthermore, faculty members also play important roles in mentoring and advising students, conducting research, developing new courses and curricula, and participating in academic governance. These roles require human expertise and judgement, which AI cannot fully replace.*
>
> *"In summary, while AI may play a growing role in education, it is unlikely that it will fully replace faculty members anytime soon."[8]*

Keep an eye on that *"anytime soon"* phrase…

I promise that's the end of my Chat GPT quotes, but I will come back to the AI topic throughout this talk.

The ethical, social, academic, intellectual and enterprise challenges and opportunities inherent in the Age of Artificial Intelligence are but one dimension of the kaleidoscope of issues that beset higher education going into the middle of the 21st Century. Some of the issues are relatively mundane, though vexing and even life-threatening for some institutions: enrollment, money, aging infrastructure. Other issues are enormous questions of purpose and content and mission: the future of the humanities, workforce demands, political attacks on our freedom to engage in whatever teaching and research we deem important. Presidents are whip-sawed --- one minute courting donors at posh clubs, returning home to find leaking roofs or worse, active shooters, all while trying to meet payroll, placate politicians, understand rapidly changing technologies and ensure the home team is winning most of the time.

Of all the challenges we face, I have chosen just 3 this afternoon that I believe are particularly relevant for this group of faculty and students here at the University of Pennsylvania --- I suspect and dearly hope that there are future presidents, provosts and deans in this room, and I am particularly addressing my comments to those future leaders and the faculty who are preparing you for institutional leadership in higher education.

I am headlining the 3 challenges: Leadership, Lift and Leverage, and they are entwined.

Leadership: Challenge #1. How are we going to develop new leadership for a new kind of higher education enterprise in a new era of our global society?

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[8] Ibid.

Farewell, the dinosaurs….

Let me speak the hard truth: I am, probably, a dinosaur. Just a small one! I am a university president born in the middle of the 20th century --- a classic Boomer --- educated during and in the aftermath of the tumultuous 1960's, influenced by iconic role models like Notre Dame President Ted Hesburgh and Chicago's Hannah Holborn Gray. I read Kerr, Bok and Bowen to educate myself about the presidency. I came to the presidency by accident --- I was a public interest lawyer, a fund raiser for Georgetown Law School, an active volunteer for my undergraduate alma mater Trinity when the founding congregation of sisters (Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur) finally admitted they had no more qualified candidates for the job. Trinity had fallen on hard times in the late 1980's as enrollment declined and finances were precarious. I was a member of the Board of Trustees and they asked me to step up because, they said, I often opined on what should be done to restructure Trinity. "Fix it or close it," the sister board chair said when she handed me the keys to the President's Office at Trinity. That was August 1, 1989, and I never looked back.

Being at the tail end of the Boomer generation of presidents, I know full well that we are in the midst of a radical generational change in presidencies, one that will accelerate across the next decade even as the job is changing rapidly and radically in some cases because our very enterprise is also changing rapidly and radically.

Who will lead higher education to 2050 and beyond --- what is the enterprise that they will be leading, and what characteristics, qualities and skill sets will they need to be effective and successful?

Even as I confess that I came to the presidency in a very non-traditional way, which makes me somewhat biased, I have to predict that the traditional pathway to the presidency may be, increasingly, an artifact of gentler, more stable times. That traditional pathway was largely a well-worn path through a distinguished faculty career, tenure, perhaps a department chair, a deanship, a provost, a president. While faculties may still clamor for that traditional model of the president, steeped in faculty life, boards and other constituents are increasingly looking for different experiences and talents.

Now, you are probably saying, geez, she's holding up the CEO model --- no, don't get ahead of my story! We presidents are CEO's, but I'm not particularly a fan of what the business folks on the board mean when they say, "Let's get a great CEO in here!"

Enter politically savvy actors….

As political pressures continue to rise against higher education, NextGen presidents need to be, more than ever, politically savvy actors, able to negotiate the perilous pathways among competing interests and constituencies in government and the private sector, on campus and in the society beyond, advocates in all places for the central importance and value of higher education even as they lead dynamic innovation in higher education's personnel, processes and products -- yes, "products," the curricula, programs and services that our student consumers want to buy.

Presidents even now, and certainly in the future, cannot define their roles as museum curators, concierges or high class beggars, even though there are days when we may feel like all of that. Real leadership in higher education claims the central authority of our industry for the production and stewardship of knowledge and the formation of persons capable of using that knowledge for the advancement of our global society and its citizens.

Sadly, in the three decades that I have been a president, I have watched too many presidents fail to claim that central authority, adopting a self-protective crouch against the political winds blowing in from Washington or the state capital or the alumni house or, on occasion, even the faculty lounge. Conflict-avoidant personalities should not apply for presidencies; managing conflict among competing forces while raising up and sustaining the core mission of the university is not for the fainthearted.

Presidential courage is particularly important when the political sector moves to take over the mission and purpose of the university. What we are seeing today in Florida and Texas and Virginia and elsewhere is not some minor skirmish that will end quietly. In ways that may be unprecedented in American history --- even considering the McCarthy Era --- we have governors and legislators aggressively pursuing an ideological takeover agenda --- taking over collegiate curricula, faculty hiring, staff training, student activities, admissions goals, boards. Diminishing if not abolishing academic freedom.

The current battleground is public higher education since the governors claim that because they pay for it they can own it; but let's not be naïve, what affects Penn State will also, ultimately, affect Penn. Private higher education may have wider margins, but that also imposes on us greater responsibilities to be advocates and activists for the autonomy of ALL universities from political interference. I have often said that higher education is the great counterweight to government in a free society. We must leverage that counterweight constantly to resist the governmental urge to repress freedom of speech and thought, academic freedom whose exercise should challenge the authoritarian abuse of political power.

I have been immensely disappointed in the last year that more presidents have not been more visible, public, ardent advocates for the central intellectual authority of the university and its independence of governmental control of curricula, pedagogy, research and innovation. As we saw, with sorrow and shame, in Florida some presidents were even co-opted into signing a statement that seemed to support the purging of racial equity initiatives, women's studies, gender studies, critical race theory, protections for LGBTQ+ persons, and other topics that should be part and parcel of any and every university's programming in the 21st Century of these United States.

Leading a radical revolution in structure and financing of higher ed….

Now, to think of the more pragmatic task ahead: even as they must not shrink from claiming higher education's central and independent intellectual authority in our free society, a new generation of presidents will also have to lead a radical revolution in the structure and financing of higher education.

It is impossible to think that universities will simply continue to raise tuition and fees every year with no end in sight and no change in the structure of this business. Here at Penn, your undergraduate cost of attendance exceeds $80,000 annually, or roughly $320,000 for four years. Who can afford that, save for the wealthiest members of our society? And can the sources of institutional aid for middle class and more impoverished students continue unabated? The structure is broken already, and the stresses are unsustainable.

The fix is neither easy nor applicable across all institutions. To control and even reduce expenses, presidents will have to consider how to reduce the three biggest expense items in most collegiate budgets: labor, infrastructure (both physical and technological), and services or amenities that customers demand. Those topics could each merit a whole course, and I'm not going into details today, but setting them out to suggest that even if substantial cost reductions in those lines were possible, higher ed will still need significant structural transformation --- the range and types of credentials offered, the pedagogical formats and delivery systems, co-curricular learning and support systems, the penchant for real estate versus the efficiency of virtual delivery, and so much more.

This kind of strategic thinking about large structural change in degrees, credentials, services and delivery systems has large impact on traditional notions of faculty work, staffing, campus management, and also may require significant overhaul of federal and state regulations to permit greater innovation in the types and formats of academic programs.

<u>Artificial Intelligence and restructuring higher education….</u>

And so I come back to Chat GPT's blithe phrase in stating that, "*…while AI may play a growing role in education, it is unlikely that it will fully replace faculty members **anytime soon.**"*

As NextGen presidents dive into the questions of dramatic transformation of the academy for the mid-to-late 21st Century demands, Artificial Intelligence will surely be one of the topics for their consideration, including the question of how much of the labor cost of this business could be contained through prudent use of AI. [Perhaps I should say good night and show myself out now??]

NextGen presidents will lead institutions and an industry in which Artificial Intelligence is not just an interesting sidebar tool but a central fact of life shaping both the academy and the workplaces we are preparing our students to enter and lead. Consider how AI is already reshaping much of healthcare delivery from patient communications to diagnosis and treatments --- how do university programs in Nursing and Medicine and other healthcare professions incorporate AI in pedagogy and simulation and clinical experiences?

But the academy will not simply be teaching about AI applications, but also, more importantly, how we teach and manage the ethical, intellectual, social and political implications of this technology to control its risks while leveraging its benefits. Ten years from now, we will be long past the reaction to ChatGPT as a danger to student writing. The pedagogical and ethical questions will be how we teach our students to evaluate the effectiveness and quality of AI solutions to the range of human needs.

A central task of any college president is, and will continue to be, the articulation of the values of the academy --- not just excellence and quality in teaching, research and scholarship, but also the moral values of human dignity, freedom and social transformation for good. NextGen presidents cannot be agnostic about the impact of new technologies on both the academy and society, they must have both the knowledge and courage to articulate the pathway through increasingly complex questions that may skirt the limits of human intellectual capacity.

The next challenge: Lift.

Even as NextGen presidents are jousting with governors and having late night arguments with the next version of HAL, they have to figure out how to make higher education even more accessible to people historically and still largely left out of this enterprise. Higher education must become a more radically inclusive enterprise ---- must make a bolder, larger commitment to "lift every voice"[9] in the words of that great civil rights hymn, and especially those voices that have been absent, repressed, unwelcome or discarded for too long.

This era's political assault on the academy's work in promoting racial and social equity has considerable damaging effects over the longer-term not only for the persons historically excluded, not only for higher education, but for our society that cannot seem to find a way to burn out the long roots of racial and ethnic hatred, gender discrimination and religious intolerance.

While the appalling authoritarian assault by Ron DeSantis on Florida's universities may be the most hideous spectacle in the current political movement against racial and social equity, make no mistake: the movement is alive and well in about half the states in these United States. Whether demanding accounting for training on DEI efforts, or eliminating courses and majors on race and gender studies, or banning Critical Race Theory or "divisive topics" --- all of these actions by state and local politicians are a governmental effort to roll back the clock, to diminish the presence of and influence of Black, Latino, Asian, LGBTQ+ persons, those who are Jewish or Muslim, not only in the academy but in leadership positions in our society.

Just consider the absurd statements by some politicians and pundits to the effect that the SVB failure was because of "wokeism" and specifically the presence of one Black person and one LGBTQ+ person and several women in the SVB board. Ridiculous, but a window into a mindset that is all about holding onto political power by repressing and excluding persons who challenge and most likely threaten the hegemony of the white ruling elite.

This is not just an ideological difference of opinion; the purging of DEI work is undermining the long-term productivity of our nation. The intellectual and technical skill demands of the current and future economy require more higher learning for more people, and programs promoting diversity, equity and inclusion are intended to open pathways and ensure greater success for all students. For the United States to indulge this selfish, myopic, tyrannical assault on DEI at a time when the economy is suffering severe talent shortage – a condition likely to worsen going forward --- is both morally wrong and economically disastrous.

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[9] "Lift Every Voice and Sing," James Weldon Johnson, 1900, see https://naacp.org/find-resources/history-explained/lift-every-voice-and-sing

University leaders today and in the future must take a much bolder, less apologetic, less fearful and more righteous stance on the absolute necessity of greater inclusivity in the academy, broadening our curricular horizons and welcoming staff, faculty and students of color in greater number than ever before. To do any less is to concede the future of our nation and global society to a dystopian autocracy where inequality stokes domestic unrest and violence while short-changing the potential for economic growth and social transformation.

Third and final challenge for today: Leverage for innovation!

March Madness seems to be the perfect time to opine on higher education's instinct to be institutionally competitive while, too often, avoiding collaborations that could leverage our collective resources for greater innovation and socio/economic advancement. Oh, sure, we have consortia and various associations where we come together on occasion to discuss issues of mutual concern, often focused on regulatory issues like zoning or financial aid --- issues where our collective interests are to fend off outside interference in our business. But we spend a lot more time on competition, playing the rankings games, figuring out how we can grab a little bit more market share from the other schools in our class, enjoying the status of invitations to exclusive clubs that often have few seats at the table for the non-elite colleges and universities that do the hard work of education in the community and among marginalized populations, particularly those known as Minority Serving Institutions.

To build a stronger, more influential sector for higher education in the future, institutions must strive for greater collaboration, leaving those competitive instincts behind like so many broken brackets on the page. Greater collaboration is essential to leverage the great wealth and powerful intellectual capital of our enterprise for innovation that supports social transformation.

As one example of collaborative leverage for social change: instead of every elite institution pledging some scholarships for Black and Hispanic "high-achieving" students to move their diversity enrollment stats up a notch, imagine what could happen if the 25-50 wealthiest universities in this country created a pooled fund –- a foundation --- to provide scholarships for impoverished students attending other institutions that actually have expertise in serving low income students of color; the bridge could even be built starting in high school with dual enrollment grant funding and continue through a transfer opportunity for some of the grantees to enroll at the elite institutions later in their baccalaureate programs, or even better, for graduate school. The idea that institutions would cooperate and collaborate across educational levels, sharing funding to support students across many different institutions, would support enlarged enrollment of low income students and strengthen the pathway for those students through degree completion and postgraduate education. Just one example.

Another example of collaboration to leverage innovation across sectors: Just last week, I participated in a roundtable hosted by the Greater Washington Board of Trade, our regional chamber of commerce, on the topic of the Titanium Economy[10] – a concept presented by researchers at McKinsey & Co., focusing on a small group of about 4,000 industrial technology companies that are revitalizing the idea of manufacturing using digitalization of operations,

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[10] See The Titanium Economy, McKinsey, https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/industrials-and-electronics/our-insights/the-titanium-economy-an-introduction

upskilling the workforce, practicing sustainability. While the jobs require some postsecondary education, most do not require baccalaureate or beyond --- so why were we college presidents at the table?

We have a large responsibility to understand emerging industries and workforce trends even those that may at first seem incidental to our work – and a huge opportunity to work with industries where the work, while incidental to our programs today, may help us to restructure our enterprise in the future. This goes back to the issue I mentioned earlier about a radical restructuring of higher education credentials --- a little bit of this is going on right now with everything from dual enrollment and early college to stackable certificate credits and some innovation in degrees. But what's the magic of 120 credits? Why do we shudder and look away when someone suggests that associate degrees might be a good choice for some students? Why can't we think about breaking up learning packets into new sets of credentials that can, indeed, come together in a bachelor's or master's degree with integrity, but that also works more effectively for the large number of students --- a majority, actually --- who simply cannot go through college in a straight-line 4-year commitment. That's fewer than 20% of today's students, by the way.

Agree or disagree, the public perceives higher education today as self-absorbed, incredibly wealthy and not particularly accountable to the public interest. This is part of our political problem as well. Leveraging our resources in partnership with emerging and existing industries is essential to restoring and reinforcing the role of the university as a major driver of economic growth and social good for the broadest possible communities of interest. Smarter leverage with a broader range of partners engaging more learners in wider learning and credentialing opportunities will benefit our enterprise and institutions as well as the society that expects more of us every day.

Leadership. Lift. Leverage. These are but three dimensions of the challenges confronting higher education moving toward the middle of the 21st Century. I have no doubt that we have the intellectual talent to figure out solutions to these challenges; the real question remains whether we have the stamina, fortitude and courage to engage the transformation necessary to succeed.